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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000180

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TAGS: PREL TU IS

SUBJECT: TURKEY: ERDOGAN'S CRITICISM OF ISRAEL SPARKS
CONTROVERSY...AGAIN

REF: A. ANKARA 102

1B. ANKARA 148

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G. Weiner for resons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Turkish/Israeli relations became tenser following Prime Minister Erdogan's January 23 comments criticizing the GOI for its siege of Gaza. In remarks to his party's parliamentary caucus, Erdogan called the Gaza Strip an "open air prison" and blamed Israel for this "humanitarian tragedy." In contrast, the MFA has carefully crafted its response to events in Gaza, mindful to keep Turkey's official policy in line with that of the EU. Erdogan's pro-Palestine stance has traditionally resonated well with his domestic constituency; this was to have been coupled with the announcement of aid, which was delayed. The rant has earned the PM no bounce at a time of domestic focus on other issues.
End Summary.

12. (C) Turkey's response to Israel's recent Gaza Strip border closing has again raised tensions between the two governments. During a January 23 televised address to his Justice and Development Party's (AKP) parliamentary group, PM Erdogan criticized Israel's Palestinian policy. Calling Gaza a "human tragedy" and an "open air prison," he condemned a "practice that amounts to punishing nearly two million innocent people due to some rocket attacks." Erdogan said that he had asked the GOI to provide him with statistics on how many Israeli citizens died as a result of such events. In the absence of a response, he concluded that Palestinian missiles have resulted in no Israeli causalities while "every Israeli Defense Force (IDF) attack in the Gaza Strip kills dozens of Palestinians." (The official transcript makes no reference to the issue of Israeli deaths.)

13. (C) The tone of Erdogan's comments immediately elicited GOI concern. Israeli Embassy spokesman Amit Zarouk confirmed press reports that his MFA had called in Turkish Ambassador Namik Tan on January 23 to express "uneasiness" with Erdogan's assertions. Israeli Ambassador Gabby Levy conveyed a similar message in Ankara to MFA Deputy U/S Feridun Sinirlioglu. Tan reportedly explained that PM Erdogan was speaking to "his own constituency" and the GOT's official policy is "completely different." No official telephone diplomacy has taken place between Ankara and Tel Aviv, but Zarouk expected Israeli PM Shimon Peres and Turkish FM Ali Babacan had likely discussed the issue during their meeting

on the margins of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

¶ 14. (C) Two days before Erdogan's speech, the MFA issued a much softer statement expressing "great concern" over events in Gaza and calling for an immediate end to the GOI's embargoes and blockades as the practices "further aggravate the life of the people in the Gaza Strip (and) merely serve the goals of extremist elements." MFA Israel/Palestine desk officer Murat Omeroglu emphasized that Turkey's policy on the issue is in line with the views expressed by the EU.

¶ 15. (C) AKP MP Zeynep Dagi told us that Erdogan's speech reflected a growing Turkish sense that Israel's collective punishment policy is unacceptable. Dagi dismissed the Prime Minister's more dubious statements as stemming from his "emotional" nature. Erdogan's speech received limited play in the Turkish media, which split their time between Sudanese President Bashir's and Greek PM Karamanlis' visits to Turkey (reflets). Several prominent columnists have criticized Erdogan for increasing tensions with Israel.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: Reflecting his personal beliefs and a pragmatic understanding of Turkish public opinion, Erdogan has routinely criticized the GOI following incidents in the Palestinian territories. Though they do not like it, the Israelis have come to expect such remarks from him. Coming on the heels of the controversial Bashir visit, Erdogan's decision to take such a hard stance on Gaza has caused some - including Turkish commentators - to question the impact of this administration's foreign policy on Turkey's image in the West. The MFA is also beginning to show signs of damage control fatigue. The Israeli Embassy told us that Ambassador Tan's response to Erdogan's speech focused on philosophical differences between the Prime and Foreign Ministries. End

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